

Witchfinding in General and the Censors

Julian Petley

Abstract

This article examines why it took 33 years before *Mark of the Devil* (1970) could be distributed in its complete form in the UK. It shows that when the film was first submitted to the British Board of Film Censors in 1970 the cuts required were so extensive that no exhibitor was prepared to show it. Although released on video in 1981, it soon found itself on the Director of Public Prosecution's list of videos which were liable to seizure and possible forfeiture under Section 3 of the Obscene Publications Act, and it was not submitted on video to the British Board of Film Classification until 1993, when four minutes and 20 seconds of cuts were required. In 2003 it was re-submitted on video, and this time escaped with only 38 seconds of cuts. Eventually, in 2015, it was released completely uncut on video. In order to help to pinpoint the elements of the film which

the BBFC found so objectionable and problematic, the article compares its treatment at the hands of the Board with that of *Witchfinder General* (1968). The article concludes by briefly tracing the film's censorship history in Australia and Germany.

Keywords: *Mark of the Devil*, *Witchfinder General*, British Board of Film Censors, British Board of Film Classification, torture, violence, Obscene Publications Act 1959, John Trevelyan, Index.

Introduction

Up until the late 1960s it was common practice for producers to submit scripts to the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC), in order not to waste money shooting scenes, or indeed entire films, which the Board would refuse to pass. Certain horror scenarios were either turned down flat – as in the case of the 1944 Burke and Hare-related story *The Anatomist* and the 1947 Jack the Ripper project *Murder in Whitechapel* – or subject to extremely stringent vetting, a fate which befell many British horrors in the 1950s and 1960s.¹ BBFC Secretary John Trevelyan, and later BBFC Director James Ferman, also tended to offer detailed advice during the editing of potentially ‘problematic’ movies, so that, although such films might appear to have emerged unscathed after being officially submitted to the BBFC, they could not be described as, strictly speaking, ‘uncensored’.

The few British films which have actually been cut by the BBFC during the classification process itself have therefore tended to attract a good deal of attention. Horror titles include *The*

Curse of the Werewolf (Terence Fisher, 1961), *Exposé* (James Kenelm Clarke, 1976), *Vampyres* (José Ramón Larraz, 1974) and *Witchfinder General* (Michael Reeves, 1968). It’s all too easy, however, to allow the realities of the censorship process to become obscured by a patina of myth. In the case of *Witchfinder General*, for example, rumours long abounded of cuts of four, seven and even eleven minutes. In fact, as was revealed when a restored version of the film was released on video by Redemption in 1995 and then on DVD by Metrodome in 2002, the cuts ran to no more than about one-and-a-half minutes.

However, the actual cuts made to the finished print are only part of the story, one which is particularly revealing about attitudes on the part of the BBFC in the late 1960s to horror cinema in general. The purpose of this article is to explore these attitudes in detail by reference to not only *Witchfinder General* but also to a film which was clearly inspired by it, namely the West German *Mark of the Devil* (*Hexen bis aufs Blut gequält*, Michael Armstrong, 1970). This is

undoubtedly much more explicit than *Witchfinder General* in its representation of violence, and was correspondingly treated much more harshly by the BBFC when it was submitted first on film in 1970 and then on video in 1993 (by which time the BBFC had changed its name to the British Board of Film Classification). But the elements to which the BBFC took exception in both films were exactly the same: ‘excessive’, explicit and long-drawn-out scenes involving violence, and their appearance in a film also containing scenes of a sexual nature and scenes involving female nakedness. Indeed, *Mark of the Devil*, in its scene of a young woman on the rack, shattered one of the BBFC’s most venerated and long-standing taboos, namely violence being inflicted on a naked female body, and this taboo remained in place right up until 2012. The fate of both films, but especially that of *Mark of the Devil*, thus illustrates particularly clearly the kind of judgements exercised by the BBFC which for so long kept a certain kind of continental European horror film off British cinema and video screens

– or ensured that these films were shown only in highly bowdlerised versions.

“Perfectly Beastly”

When Tigon boss Tony Tenser discovered Ronald Bassett’s 1966 novel *Witchfinder General* he saw it, according to scriptwriter Tom Baker, as a “hanger for an action movie”,² and asked Baker and Michael Reeves, who’d already made a name for themselves on Tigon’s *The Sorcerers* (Michael Reeves, 1967), to make a script out of it. Bassett’s novel is set in the 1640s in eastern England and concerns the activities of ‘Witchfinder General’ Matthew Hopkins (Vincent Price) and his assistant John Stearne (Robert Russell). In the course of their activities they encounter an old priest, John Lowes (Rupert Davies) and his niece Sara (Hilary Dwyer). Lowes is accused of witchcraft and, in order to try to save him, Sara gives herself to Hopkins. However, after she is raped by Stearne, Hopkins abandons her and hangs Lowes. The two then find themselves pursued by Ralph Margery (Ian Ogilvy), a Cornet of Horse in Cromwell’s army, and Sara’s fiancé.

Eventually Stearne robs Hopkins, who sets off in pursuit, during which he encounters Margery and his troop, who hang him in the same manner as his victims.

Baker and Reeves's original script kept fairly closely to the novel, although with some significant changes and additions.³ It did not, however, meet with the approval of BBFC examiner, F. N. Crofts, whose notes of 4 August 1967 describe it as "an unseemly story" which "provides endless chances for brutality, murder and rape".⁴ The opening scene of the hanging of a 'witch', one of Baker and Reeves's most striking additions, is described as "absurdly drawn out with sadistic relish [...]. It should be much shortened, the execution should be suggested only". Meanwhile the scene which follows the credits, in which royalist snipers fire on a group of parliamentary soldiers, including Ralph Margery (here re-named as Richard Marshall) meets with the response: "No beastly shot, I hope", whilst the shot of a body somersaulting after being hit by a bullet is criticised as "ghoulish". The first love-making

scene between Richard and Sara states that Richard "runs his hands over shoulder and down onto her breasts"; Crofts adds: "not onto her breasts", also observing: "I am not taken with Sara's brazenness which sounds more like the 20th Century than the 17th". Of the scene in which Lowes is searched by Stearne for the 'devil's mark' he complains: "This repeated jabbing of Lowes with a steel spike is censorable: one blow would be enough. And I don't think that we should have the scene in which he is forced round and round a table till he drops". In the scene in which Sara goes to bed with Hopkins, the direction states that she is "showing her figure silhouetted through the material of her nightgown", which Crofts notes has already been described as "almost transparent"; he then warns that "there should be nothing suggestive here". Of Stearne's rape of Sara in which "he literally starts to tear her clothes off her", he comments: "This whole business will be censorable if it is done in anything like this fashion. The most we could allow would be something that suggested what was going to happen and the beginning of the

struggle”. The subsequent beating of Lowes by Stearne is condemned as “pure sadism and unnecessary”. When Lowes and others accused of witchcraft are ‘tested’ by being half-drowned, Crofts complains of their “sadistic treatment”, insisting that shots of their struggling to avoid drowning should be removed completely, and adding that a stage direction suggesting that some of this scene could be filmed from below water-level is “ghoulish”, whilst the burning of a witch in Lavenham (Ipswich in the novel) is “disgusting and censorable”.

In Bassett’s novel, Stearne simply disappears after robbing Hopkins. However, Baker and Reeves were not going to let him escape justice, and, in their original script, have him fall among a band of gypsies, whose hospitality he repays by trying to rape a girl. She resists, digging her nails into his eyes, which elicits the response: “Disgusting and, I think, censorable” from Crofts. The gypsies then kill Stearne, and his corpse is found “‘horribly mutilated’, whatever that implies. Anyhow, we don’t want it”. Baker and Reeves despatch Hopkins in the same

manner as did Bassett, a manner of which Crofts disapproves, noting: “No doubt Hopkins is a swine but all this sadism is concerned with pleasure not justice in the writer’s mind”. He concludes: “Personally I should not grieve if this script dropped dead in its tracks”.

What is particularly interesting about Crofts’s comments is that they seem to suggest that the film affronted him almost personally. The same tone was adopted by another examiner, Newton Branch, who, on 5 August, described *Witchfinder General* as a “perfectly beastly” script. However, this note adds: “This ape Tenser will continue to be a time-wasting nuisance until the Board puts him in his place”, which clearly suggests that there were those within the Board who saw *Witchfinder General* as presenting it with an opportunity to teach Tenser a lesson for upsetting them previously – notably with *How Much Loving Does a Normal Couple Need?* (Russ Meyer, 1967) and *Bloody Pit of Horror* (*Il boia scarlatto*, Massimo Pupillo, 1967), both of which the Board had banned.

On 9 August Crofts wrote to Tony Tenser,
testily informing him:

We have now read your script *Witch-Hunter* [sic] *General* and we are greatly disturbed by it. It could fairly well be described as a study in sadism in which every detail of cruelty and suffering is lovingly dwelt on [...]. Even in the battle scenes there is excessive emphasis on decapitation and other sensational shots [...]. A film which followed the script at all closely would run into endless censorship trouble.

The battle scenes referred to here are the Battle of Naseby in which Stearne (in the original script) and Hopkins (in the novel) become unwillingly involved. As Tom Baker explains:

We tossed in a couple of pages of montage of the Battle of Naseby knowing that we'd be very lucky to get anyone to pay to shoot anything more than that. Mike was pretty keen on bloody stuff and wanted to deal with the horrors of war in a realistic fashion, as in the opening ambush scene.

In the event, budgetary constraints precluded the filming of these scenes.⁵

“Breast Work”

A revised script was rapidly submitted to the Board, and vetted by Branch on 20 August. Of

the opening execution he noted: “The hanging of the hag has been toned down. But we still do not want to hear her screaming or see her being unduly dragged about, fainting etc. The execution should be suggested more than seen”. Caution is urged over “breast work” between Richard and Sara, and Stearne’s spiking of Lowes is still a problem: “We don’t want too much sadistic stabbing”. In the scenes between Sara and Hopkins, caution is urged over Sarah’s “‘almost transparent’ nightgown [...]. We don’t want any ‘silhouetted’ shots of her body as seen through her peignoir or anything particularly ‘suggestive’ here”. In a gaol scene at Brandeston in which Stearne tortures a young woman in the cell next to Lowes, Branch states: “We do not want to see Stearne knocking her about or manhandling her”, adding that: “Lowes must not be ‘hurled against the wall’ or brutally treated”. The drownings are still a problem and should be “omitted”: “The fact that one of the women is pregnant shows the noble intentions of the fabricators of this muck. It is sufficient that people be hanged and without undue cruelty or gloating camera angles”. A fight between

Stearne and Marshall “can be reasonably violent but it must not be beastly; for example, the ‘groin-kneeing’ must come out”. Of the Lavenham witch-burning scene Branch fulminates: “This whole episode is disgusting and designed only for the pleasure of sadists and should be left out or drastically altered”.

In this version of the script, Baker and Reeves had changed the ending of the film, albeit for budgetary reasons and not because of Crofts’s original comments. As Baker explains:

The original ending was set around this large lake which we found on army land in Norfolk. I had this vision of an encampment of gypsies with their piebald ponies and so on, with the witchfinder hanging in silhouette from this one tree by the lake and the lovers walking off into the sunset – must be my soft heart!

In the revised ending, Hopkins and Stearne torture Sara before Marshall’s eyes in a dungeon: Marshall manages to stick a pike into Stearne and Hopkins, knocking over a vat of flaming coals in the process and starting a conflagration which consumes both of the witchfinders. This is still a far cry from the

Jacobean, axe-wielding horrors of the ending which Reeves actually shot and which, according to executive producer Tony Tenser, the director also wanted to embellish with pig’s entrails hanging out of the butchered Hopkins, an embellishment which Tenser knew would never get past the censors and from which he dissuaded Reeves.⁶ However, the torture was too much for Branch, who remarked: “If there is to be anything like this it won’t do for an X. One cannot object to our couple being threatened with torture but as scripted this sequence is well over the horror comic boundary”, and warned that the film “should not make too much of a meal out of the manner of his [Hopkins’s, J. P.] dying”. According to Baker: “The way the finished film ends is very much Mike’s take on the story – he wanted it that way, and it’s not for nothing that his films end with desperate events in which the hero is either driven mad or destroyed”.

The events surrounding how the various changes to the end of the story carried over into the shooting itself are fascinatingly described by

actors Ian Ogilvy and Nicky Henson, producer Tony Tenser and associate producer Philip Waddilove.⁷ Among other things these recollections reveal that the fiery climax was vetoed by the National Trust, who owned Orford Castle, where the ending was shot, and that the now-famous denouement was a combined effort on the part of Waddilove, who came up with the idea of Sarah being tortured on the altar-like structure, and Reeves, who contributed the maniacal axe-attack.

The script report concludes with not only a critical aside about Tenser but also a very revealing remark about Hammer:

We used, at one time, to have a lot of trouble with Hammer who are now, I gather, about the most reasonable of our customers. The sooner Tenser stops trying it on, the better. The final draft of this script must have been in the pipeline when we were subject to the first one. This sort of behaviour does waste so much of our time. Tenser knows to within a couple of frames what will pass.

“Really Nasty, Sadistic Stuff”

On 24 August, BBFC Secretary John Trevelyan, who was in fact a distant cousin of Reeves,

wrote to Tenser explaining what was still required. Of the opening, he remarked: “Discretion should be used with these scenes. We would not want undue brutality to the old woman or too much screaming and yelling. We would also prefer the shot of the hanging body to be long shot”. Regarding the love scene between Richard and Sara, he stated: “In a film of this kind we would not want too much made of scenes of passion, and I think you should avoid any obvious stroking of Sara’s breasts”, adding that in the scene with Hopkins and Sara: “We do not want suggestive shots of Sara in what is described as ‘an almost-transparent nightgown’; I see that we are to have a silhouette shot, and care should be taken with this also”. In the case of Stearne’s rape of Sara, “the most we would be likely to accept would be an implied sexual assault”. The drownings are described as “singularly unpleasant scenes and I hope that they will be treated with great discretion [...]”. Could you not consider leaving the two women out of it?” He also adds: “We would not want any really nasty shots of hanging bodies”. The Lavenham witch burning was still a cause for

concern: “This is really nasty, sadistic stuff, and I wish you could get rid of it entirely. If you are not prepared to do this you must tone it down drastically”. As for the climax, Trevelyan notes: “If not done discreetly [it] could cause real trouble” and concludes: “We would not want any nastiness here”.

Trevelyan met with Tenser and Reeves on 29 August to discuss the BBFC’s concerns about the revised script. According to Benjamin Halligan:

Mike agreed to shoot the more problematic sequences of the film in such a way as to allow for BBFC cutting, should it be deemed necessary, without the loss of continuity, and Trevelyan was to view a rough cut of the film during the early days of post-production for further guidance. Another draft of the shooting script was to be prepared, accommodating the majority of the BBFC advise [sic].⁸

However, when the finished film was submitted to the BBFC on 29 March 1968, a number of the scenes mentioned above still remained problematic from the Board’s point of view. As agreed, Trevelyan had seen the rough cut of the film and had pronounced it unexceptionable;

however, when he saw the finished version he realised that the dubbing and the musical score heightened the violence considerably, and that cuts would be required. These were decided upon by Crofts and another examiner, R. S. W., on 29 March 1968. Thus in Stearne’s initial torture of Lowes we find the instruction:

“Reduce to one shot – the first shot – the spiking of Lowes in the back, and reduce his screams”.

In the prison scene: “Remove the whole episode of a woman being hit and half-strangled in a cell; there should be no shot of her at all”. In the drowning/hanging scene: “Reduce to a minimum the ducking of the parson and the two women”.

In the Lavenham scene: “Reduce to a minimum the burning of Elizabeth Clark, including shots of her being dragged to the gibbet. There should be no shots of her screaming and only a distant shot of her in the flames”. This scene required

19 seconds of cuts in all, and was the most heavily censored scene in the film. In the final scene: “Remove the whole episode of Sara being tortured with a spike and all sounds of her screams. Reduce to one – the first – the shots of Richard chopping up Matthew”.

“Censor-protected ‘Safe’ Brutality”

Reeves and Trevelyan met on 3 April and the former agreed to make a few further cuts. On 7 April, he sent a long letter to Trevelyan from Montego Bay, Jamaica, where he was on holiday, in which he describes the film as “despite its pedigree [...] a serious picture” and “pretty powerful [...] more so than even I thought it was going to be, and I knew what I was aiming at, despite the multitude of AIP-inspired iron manacles that were perpetually descending vice-like on my shoulder”. He also adds: “Its overall message (though I loathe the word) is as anti-violence as it can be”. The crucial passage is, however, the following:

In order for the film to retain its point, there must be a level of brutality throughout; thus, by seducing the audience into accepting it, we prime them for the ending, where the stool is whipped right from under their feet, and they are left looking at themselves, and their involvement with the foregoing violence, with, I hope (and am in fact sure) the sense of self-loathing one invariably receives when one has been momentarily involved in a flash of sadism – however slight it may be, no matter be it verbal or physical. If the film is cut to an ‘acceptable’ level of violence, this ending will lose all point and become merely ‘horror-comic’, and that is what both you and I so desperately wish to avoid. If the picture is ‘reduced’ it could well become just an exercise in gratuitous violence [...] and would have exactly the reverse effect it

is intended to have, i.e. an audience having a lovely time revelling in their nice censor-protected ‘safe’ brutality.

Referring specifically to the demand that Lowes’s screams be reduced, he asks: “What is he supposed to do? ‘Suffer Magnificently’ with just a faint moan or two? Surely this would nullify the point that suffering is horrible, degrading, as far from what one could call ‘Hollywood glamorous’ as it could be?” Likewise the burning scene: “This girl is suffering horribly, and I want the audience to suffer with her – not enjoy the sequence for its meretricious thrill value (if it has any)”. As for the climax:

If cut, and just ‘suggested’ it will just be an exciting (though probably nonsensical) finale of ‘Will the dashing hero escape and kill the dastardly villain, rescuing the fair maiden on the way?’ department. Then, instead of deeply disturbing the audience at the finish, the whole thing will merely become ludicrous, enlivened by some suggested sadism [...]. Marshall’s madness at the end must be motivated, and strongly motivated, to have any effect; so also must the final image of Sara screaming hysterically. And if the sequence in the castle is cut down, this will not be the case. As I say, the morality of the film lies in its whole content; and the fact that in the final 90 seconds, the violence explodes utterly in the face of the ‘sympathetic’ protagonists (by their own participation in it) is

the core of all that is good (morally good) in the film.⁹

“A Substantial Risk”

Unfortunately for Reeves, his pleas were to no avail. In his reply on 29 April, Trevelyan stated:

“I have no doubts about your integrity in making this picture, nor about the validity of the theme.

You set out to show that violence is horrible, especially when associated with sadism.

Unfortunately in doing so you presented us with serious problems”. These were as follows:

- (1) We have for some years taken a strong line about scenes of violence, which we believe to be often harmful, and if we passed your picture without cuts this would, to many people, appear to be a complete reversal of this policy, which has been widely publicised in the Press [sic] and on television. Whereas some people no doubt have felt that in the context of what you were saying such extremes of violence were justified, we believe that a large number of cinemagoers would not only be revolted by the violence, which indeed you would want them to be, but would be unlikely to appreciate the point that you were making through it;
- (2) We believe that, while many people deplore violence, there are some who not only accept it but actually enjoy it. This is something that we do not want to encourage, and I believe that in passing your picture we would be taking a substantial risk of doing this.

- (3) There is reason to believe that the continuous diet of violence through screen entertainment, both cinema and television, may be conditioning people to its acceptance, so that they are becoming indifferent to it. While you can argue that this justifies what you have done, there is an equally strong argument that we should maintain our present policy.¹⁰

What strikes one most forcefully about reading the examiners’ notes today is the extent to which cutting, and preferably banning, *Witchfinder General* seems to have become almost a personal crusade, a last ditch attempt to hold back the forces of disorder. These are Branch’s and examiner A. O. F.’s final thoughts on the subject, in a memo dated 25 April 1968:

The President has seen the film. It is understood that he feels less strongly than the original examiners about certain scenes; but NKB and AOF do most anxiously urge the Secretary not to give any ground beyond what the President thinks absolutely necessary and to represent to him the difficulties presented to us as a Board by being more lenient to this film than to other historical films representing forms of brutality and torture which, in this country, have long been discontinued. A film which, moreover, is made to look to the public like ‘just another horror film’ by the presence in a leading role of Vincent Price.

What, one wonders, was really going on in these people’s minds? Could it be the case that,

beneath all the bleatings about “breast-work” and “groin-kneeing”, the examiners’ real, if unacknowledged, concern was that Reeves had utilised a popular genre to deliver to a potentially sizeable audience a film that painted a highly disturbing picture of the English past, one that ruthlessly ripped aside the cosy clichés so assiduously cultivated both by school textbooks and the tourist industry? After all, as the film’s most assiduous defender, Tom Milne, had noted in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*: “Throughout the whole film there is a vivid sense of time out of joint”,¹¹ whilst in the *Observer* he described how “a canker spreads incurably through England’s green and pleasant land; and the delicate patchwork of green fields and forests is gradually shot through with the colours of blood and decay”.¹² Meanwhile, in France, the film was seen by some as not just a peculiarly bleak picture of Cromwellian England but as a political parable with strong contemporary resonances. Take, for example, André Desbrosses in *Revue du cinéma/Image et son*:

Clearly, *Witchfinder General* brings to mind memories of not only the monstrous Nazi machine but equally the colonial wars, Algeria, Greece, Brazil, the massacres in Vietnam, Northern Ireland today, and also Stalinism. Wherever an ideology becomes a dogma, an absolute and revealed truth, intolerance, hatred, torture and murder are born and grow ever more hungry for martyrs. Violence becomes epidemic: it reaches closer and closer to even the soundest elements of the population.¹³

If these are the kinds of ‘subversive’ thoughts which *Witchfinder General* can awaken (especially in the head of Johnny Foreigner) then perhaps it’s hardly surprising that the film should have evoked intense hostility in such an indomitable guardian of the status quo as the British Board of Film Censors.

Pushing the Envelope

Unsurprisingly, *Witchfinder General* rapidly spawned a number of imitators, among them Jess Franco’s *The Bloody Judge (Il trono di fuoco)*, (1970), Michael Armstrong’s *Mark of the Devil* (1970) and Paul Naschy’s *Inquisition (Inquisición)*, (1978). This last was never released in the UK. A considerably toned-down version of the Franco film, running at about 81 minutes, was passed uncut with an AA certificate by the

BBFC for cinema release in 1983, and an 89-minute version emerged unscathed on video in 1990 with an 18 certificate. However, it was not until 2013 that a “fully restored European version”, running at 103 minutes, was made available on DVD in the UK, and passed uncut at 18 by the BBFC. But *Mark of the Devil* was treated much more harshly, which is unsurprising, given that it pushes the envelope even further than *Witchfinder General* had done. The film had its origins in a script entitled *The Witch-Hunter Dr Dracula*, which was written by producer and former matinée idol Adrian Hoven. But, even though Hoven’s original was completely rewritten and considerably toned down by Michael Armstrong, who greatly admired his friend Reeves’s film, it ran into even more trouble than its predecessor with the BBFC. One reason for this was that, as a West German film, its script had never been submitted to the Board. However, even had it been submitted, it would have been highly unlikely to be passed, given the contents of the story.

This concerns the state- and church-appointed witchfinder Lord Cumberland (Herbert Lom) and his apprentice Count Christian de Meron (Udo Kier), who travel to an Austrian village during the eighteenth century in order to replace the local, self-appointed witchfinder Albino (Reggie Nalder) and re-impose ecclesiastical authority. Albino has exploited his power in order to rape and murder local women, and has his eye on Vanessa Benedikt (Olivera Vučo). Christian clashes with Albino on account of his revolting behaviour, and the struggle becomes more intense as he and Vanessa fall for each other. But Christian also comes to realise that Cumberland is even more venal and corrupt than Albino, and increasingly questions his mission. As Cumberland’s reign of terror intensifies, including the horrific torture of Deidre von Bergenstein (Gaby Fuchs) and Baron Daumer (Michael Maien), the villagers finally gather their resolve and fight back.

“Both Vicious and Disgusting”

Mark of the Devil’s ordeals at the hands of the BBFC began in 1970, when it was picked up by

the independent distributor Edwin John Fancey, in this instance trading as S. F. (Film) Distributors, who specialised in exploitation films and owned other distribution companies including D. U. K. Films, E. J. Fancey Productions, New Realm Pictures, Embassy Films, Aqua, Fantur, and Border Films. He also produced a number of films himself, including *Soho Conspiracy* (Cecil H. Williamson, 1950), *Hangman's Wharf* (Cecil H. Williamson, 1950) and *The Traitor* (Michael McCarthy, 1957), and had financed Michael Armstrong's first film, the short *The Image* (1967). Possibly anticipating problems with the BBFC, Fancey's son, Michael, arranged a private screening for John Trevelyan, who advised the distributors to cut the film prior to submission. However, they claimed that this was impossible under the terms of their contract with Atlas International, who were dealing with the foreign distribution of the film.

This meant that the BBFC examiners saw the film in its complete state – and that they

received a considerable shock. Thus their initial report, written on 17 August 1970, complained:

The film – the most disgusting that we can remember seeing and far more sadistic than *Witchfinder General* – is practically nothing more than a series of tortures and executions with a rape and a little sex thrown in. The executions are mostly by burning but there are a few other methods (a sword, a spiked collar and a brain compressor). The tortures include racking, spiking and the bastinado, but the worst are the thumbscrews and the tearing out of a woman's tongue.

They concluded:

We recommend that the film be refused a certificate, as cutting would be useless. We don't think that any local authority would pass it and we are astonished that Messrs Fancey (or indeed any other distributor in this country) should have had anything to do with this film.

The following day Trevelyan informed the distributors that the BBFC examiners thought the film to be “both vicious and disgusting”.

However, the film was seen again by two examiners on 2 October 1970. As a result, massive cuts were required. Two scenes had to be drastically reduced: that in which a woman is burned at the stake near the start of the film,

removing in particular all the shots in which she appears to be in contact with the flames, and similarly the shots of the burning of Deidre. The following had to be removed altogether:

- Albino piercing Vanessa, and all shots and sounds of him lashing her;
- Deidre on the rack, being tortured by thumb screws, and having her feet burned;
- A young couple making love and being interrupted by Albino and his henchmen, who stab the man and try to rape the girl;
- The sight and sounds of the Baron being put upon a bed of spikes and flogged;
- The scene in which Deidre's tongue is cut out, and all the subsequent shots of her bleeding mouth and face;
- The sight and sounds of the Baron being tortured by thumb screws and having a fire placed under him;
- A man being stabbed in the eye, and shots of him holding his bleeding face afterwards;
- The water torture of the puppet master;
- Cumberland's rape of the puppet master's wife;
- The flash shot of the Baron's head being severed and the subsequent shot of his body twitching;
- The shot showing a dead man with a severed arm and bleeding stump;
- All shots showing the spiked belt with which Christian is killed.

In an accompanying letter to the distributors, Trevelyan stated that "this is a filthy and

disgusting film, and a clear candidate for total rejection".

On 5 November Trevelyan viewed the film again after the distributors had cut 1,000 ft. from it, but required yet more cuts to the scenes mentioned above. On 17 November the two original examiners also viewed it again, but still loathed what was left of the film, noting:

We agreed that whatever the original version this present one is rejectable in its own right. Cutting has clearly removed some of the impact but it remains a filthy and disgusting picture. We would support all that has been said, and prefer that it did not have a certificate.

Nonetheless, further cuts were made to the offending scenes, and on 15 January 1971 Trevelyan reported that the film had been seen by the BBFC President, Lord Harlech, noting that: "He did not like it but felt that on the whole it was less brutal now than *Witchfinder General* and that we could not justifiably refuse it". In all 2,100 ft. were cut – no less than 24 minutes.

“A Firm and Final Rejection”

With *Mark of the Devil*, or at least a version of it, finally cleared by the BBFC, Fancey, now distributing the film through New Realm Pictures, tried to interest the ABC circuit in taking it, but the censors' massive cuts had rendered it so incomprehensible that they, and indeed other exhibitors, refused to take it. However, nothing daunted, in the wake of the BBFC passing Ken Russell's *The Devils* (1971), albeit heavily cut,¹⁴ in September 1971 Fancey approached Trevelyan's successor, Stephen Murphy, to see if he would view the film and reconsider the cuts. Murphy enquired on 10 September: "How many more nasty little films have you got in the cupboard? I am beginning to think that, as a family, you require a full-time censor!" Murphy also told Fancey that he had "quite enough problems without getting involved in *Mark of the Devil*", and it wasn't until early 1973 that he actually viewed the film. However, it was to no avail, as he wrote to Fancey on 11 May, stating:

It remains one of the most revolting pieces of exploitation and violence that I have ever seen.

There is no prospect of the Board passing the picture in this form, and I can not [sic] think that any Local Authority in Britain would be likely to accept it. Will you kindly take this as a firm and final rejection?

But in spite of Murphy's strictures, Fancey then submitted *Mark of the Devil* to various local authorities. The film was refused a local certificate by the Greater London Council, which, having asked Murphy for his views on the film, received the reply: "In its full version this film, albeit now some four years old, remains one of the memorably nasty films". It was also rejected by Berkshire and Surrey County Councils. Thus the film never received a cinema release in the UK.

The original UK video release by Intervision, which appeared in November 1981, was placed by the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) on the list of 82 videos which could be seized and prosecuted under Section 3 of the Obscene Publications Act 1959, which meant that, if found guilty by local magistrates, the videos in question could be forfeited and destroyed, although there is no evidence that this ever

happened in the case of *Mark of the Devil*. This list, whose existence was unknown until it was unearthed during research for the DVD set *Video Nasties: The Definitive Guide*, needs to be distinguished from the better-known list of 72 videos which the DPP decided could be prosecuted under Section 2 of the Act, thus rendering their distributors liable to imprisonment and/or a heavy fine if found guilty.

“The Extensive Cuts Job”

In 1993 *Mark of the Devil* was submitted to the BBFC (now the British Board of Film Classification) for video release by Redemption Films. One examiner stated:

It’s a sort of *Witchfinder General* without any pretensions to ambition larger than the reconstruction of the cruelties associated with the sixteenth century witch torture. As the picture frankly and unapologetically declares in its robotically dubbed voice over: “This motion picture can only give a slight idea of the cruelty in one of the bloodiest pages in the history of men”. Still, you can’t fault it for trying.

But although this examiner expressed the opinion that it was “by no means as

sensationally malicious” as the Board’s original comments had suggested, they still felt that cuts were required for the “intermixture of nudity and torture”, in particular in the cases of two shots which “seem to dwell with such meticulous attention on the specifics of the pain inflicted”. In this examiner’s view, even though these scenes “were not visually at the far end of the sadistic continuum”, the problem was that

the primary *raison d’être* of the film is just that: the presentation of archaic details of inquisitorial torture in all their virtuosity. Indeed there is a sort of menu effect, a listing sequence propelled by visual variation and reinforced by the text (e.g. “the Spanish boot will convince him”). So, for example, although the long but curiously clothed and tightly framed rape sequence has relatively little exploitation of nudity, it nonetheless presents itself as nothing more than the opportunity to enjoy another variation of brutality.

A second examiner noted:

With time one does not need to get so hot under the collar over it, and it can pass unobtrusively after the extensive cuts job [...]. Our feeling was that it was pretty inconsequential after the problematic torture sequences were removed. Theme of witch burning is now fairly common, and those scenes are not the tricky ones. The unacceptable sequences contain close-up details of torture which have been extensively removed and reduced to establishment only.

And certainly the cuts were ‘extensive’, four minutes 27 seconds being removed in all. Entirely unsurprisingly, the cuts that were required were in many of the same scenes which had so perturbed the examiners back in 1970. Thus shots were removed of hands and fingers being tortured, of Deidre’s tongue being pulled out, of a stiletto being pushed into a stomach, and of Christian being tortured with the spiked belt, while Cumberland’s rape of the puppet master’s wife was severely truncated. Scenes removed altogether were the semi-naked Deidre on the rack, and the Baron being forced onto a bed of spikes.

Violence and Sexual Titillation

The film was resubmitted on video by Anchor Bay Entertainment in June 2003. This time only 38 seconds were cut. These involved shots of Deidre on the rack in which her naked breasts could be seen, as, at that time, the BBFC would not allow shots which, in its view, combined violence and sexual titillation. However, in 2012 the BBFC revised its policy after conducting

audience research which showed that most people interviewed felt that

merely combining violent images with nudity, even sexualised nudity, was not necessarily a problem in itself. These viewers drew a clear distinction between rape, where eroticising detail could be potentially harmful, and violence which is shot in a titillatory way.¹⁵

And so when Arrow Video submitted the film in August 2013, it was finally passed with no cuts at all. It had thus taken a mere 33 years before it could be viewed in its full form in the UK.

***Mark of the Devil* and Other Censors**

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning that *Mark of the Devil* also ran into censorship problems in other countries. In America it was advertised as “the first film rated V for violence”, but this was simply a marketing ploy, one which caused a row with the Motion Picture Association of America, which forced the distributors to withdraw their self-imposed ‘rating’. However, in Australia the Film Board of Review banned the film in August 1972 on account of its “excessive violence”. In December, Filmways Australia submitted a version shorn of about

three minutes running time, but this too was banned for the same reason. An appeal was rejected in January 1973. However, for reasons which remain unclear, the full version was passed with an R rating in July with only 55 seconds of cuts.¹⁶ The film remains banned in Norway on video.

In Germany *Mark of the Devil* was released in cinemas in 1970 with the tongue scene missing,¹⁷ although it is unclear if this scene was cut by the distributors before submitting it to the Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle der Filmwirtschaft or whether it was removed by the latter themselves. This version also circulated on video in the early 1980s, before video censorship kicked in, when the video was put on the 'Index' of the Bundesprüfstelle für jugendgefährdende Schriften, which means that it is illegal to allow minors access to it in any way or to advertise its existence (which includes writing about it or selling it online). Indeed video copies distributed by ASTRO and XT Video were seized in 2000 and 2005 respectively on the grounds that they glorified violence and thus infringed Section 131

of the German criminal code. At the time of writing, the version seized in 2005 has been removed from the Index, but the one seized in 2000 remains on it, although the distributors, Turbine Films, are hoping to challenge this decision and are considering crowdfunding a campaign to meet the legal costs involved.

In contrast to the strict regulation of violent films in Germany, Austria has never made a concerted effort to deal with this matter. Film censorship continues to be part of the stipulations for the protection of minors, which each of the nine federal states takes care of independently. Due to the existence of nine different youth protection laws, since the end of World War II there has been no consistent legal framework that could administer the circulation of films across the whole country. That is not to say that censorious endeavours and scandals around particular films have not taken place in Austria,¹⁸ but *Mark of the Devil* did not encounter any such problems. Because of the relaxed Austrian attitude with regard to regulating risqué film content, the country has

become an important place for the trade in controversial movies and indeed supplies the whole German-speaking market with these wares.

I would like to thank Edward Lamberti of the BBFC for giving me access to the BBFC files on Mark of the Devil and Witchfinder General, Andreas Ehrenreich and Christian Stiegler for providing me with information about the fate of Mark of the Devil in Germany and Austria, and Tom Baker for talking to me about Witchfinder General.

¹ See Petley, J. (2014) "Horror and the Censors", In: Benschhoff, H. M. (ed.) *A Companion to the Horror Film*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 130–147: 141–145.

² All quotations from Tom Baker are taken from an interview conducted with the author in 2003.

³ See Halligan, B. (2003) *Michael Reeves*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 109–110.

⁴ All quotations from BBFC examiners are taken from the BBFC files on *Witchfinder General* and *Mark of the Devil*.

⁵ The examiners' responses to the script are also discussed in Halligan, B. (2003) *Michael Reeves*, 121.

⁶ Murray, J. B. (2004) *The Remarkable Michael Reeves: His Short and Tragic Life*, Baltimore, MA: Luminary Press, 200.

⁷ See Murray, J. B. (2004) *The Remarkable Michael Reeves*, 198–203; Halligan, B. (2003) *Michael Reeves*, 141–147.

⁸ Halligan, B. (2003) *Michael Reeves*, 123.

⁹ The full text of the letter can be found in Murray, J. B. (2004) *The Remarkable Michael Reeves*, 209–212; Halligan, B. (2003) *Michael Reeves*, 154–158.

¹⁰ Quoted in Murray, J. B. (2004) *The Remarkable Michael Reeves*, 213.

¹¹ Milne, T. (1968) "Witchfinder General", *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 35 (414), 100.

¹² Milne, T. (1968), "A Talented Horror", *Observer*, 12 May 1968. Newspaper clipping in the microfiche on *Witchfinder General*, BFI, London.

¹³ Desbrosses, A. (1972) "Le grand inquisiteur", *Revue du cinéma/Image et son*, 259, 53–55: 55.

¹⁴ For details of the cuts see Lapper, C. (2012) "The Censors, the Studio and 'Cutting the Orgy in Two'", In: Booklet of the DVD release of *The Devils* (Ken Russell, 1971), London: BFI, 7–13; Robertson, J. C. (1989) *The Hidden Cinema: British Film Censorship in Action, 1913–1975*. London: Routledge, 136–138.

¹⁵ BBFC (2012) "BBFC Is to Adjust Sexual and Sadistic Violence Policy to Take Into Account Key Areas of Public Concern", 12 December, <http://www.bbfc.co.uk/about-bbfc/media-centre/bbfc-adjust-sexual-and-sadistic-violence-policy-take-account-key-areas>

¹⁶ Anon. (no date) "Film Censorship: M #2", *Refused-Classification.com: Censorship in Australia*, <http://www.refused-classification.com/censorship/films/m-2.html>

¹⁷ Magiccop (2008) "Hexen bis aufs Blut gequält", *Schnittberichte*, 31 July, <http://www.schnittberichte.com/schnittbericht.php?ID=1147452>

¹⁸ See Blaschitz, E. (2009) *Populärer Film und der 'Kampf gegen Schmutz und Schund': Filmrezeption in Österreich zwischen Kontrolle, Identitätsfindung und Bildungsbemühen (1946–1970)*. PhD thesis, University of Vienna.